

Property Sharing: A “win-win” for elders and family.

As I drive up Gertrude’s driveway, a long curved road through forest and lawns, I keep thinking – how can this lifestyle work at age 96?

Back in the early nineties, Gertrude and her husband purchased this property with their son and daughter in law – they chose this place because they could put two houses on it. They moved into the existing house and their son and daughter in law built a second house on the property and moved in – just a short walk by trail to the parents’ place.

Several years ago, Gertrude’s husband died. In her late eighties she gave up her drivers’ license, and so some assistance was required.

Gertrude’s daughter in law now fills her freezer with easy dinners to microwave, and drives Gertrude to church, social events and appointments. Her son visits for about an hour every morning and brings in firewood and gets the airtight going.. They both take time for mom. Through this arrangement Gertrude gets about 2-3 hours of connection with family each day, which includes, chats, drives and visiting friends in town. And a cozy fire-warmed living room and dinners ready to microwave.

Fortunately, Gertrude, apart from driving and cooking, can do most other things herself. She does not need help with the “ADL” (activities of daily living, like showering, dressing, taking meds, etc.).

But I cannot help thinking that if her family was not close by, she might have needed more help. The support and social connection they provide may do a lot to forestall other

problems. Gertrude may appear to live alone, but family is close and frequently with her, checking in, having a chat. I joke with her about how different her life would be in long term care.

A few years ago, I asked a group of seniors what their worst fear for the future was, and without exception, they replied, “going into long term care”. Why don’t seniors want to go and live there? Perhaps it is the institutionalization more than anything else – the need to eat meals with many other people at a time convenient to the management. And you cannot choose who is at your table. As seniors’ advocate, Isobel Mackenzie has quipped, “Would you want to eat breakfast at a table with Trump every day?”

That is so far removed from the family and forest embraced life that Gertrude lives. As I sit with Gertrude and her daughter in law in Gertrude’s lovely cozy living room, heated by a blazing fire close by in the airtight stove, I ask her whether she likes living out here. The answer, an emphatic “Yes”!“What do you like about it?” Her head turns to look out the window and into the fall-coloured forest. “The trees, the peace”, she replies”, and strangely, for me, the fear of aging fades away.

Jennifer Pass is the Co-ordinator of Comox Valley Elders Take Action.